

VZCZCXRO8229
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSI #0792/01 1141203
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 241203Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1433
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000792

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: OPPOSITION ENCOURAGES WOMEN PRISON RIOT
OVER EASTER

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Over Orthodox Easter night, April 18-19, approximately 600 women prisoners rioted in Tbilisi's Women's Prison Number Five. They reportedly were upset that they were not granted pardons as part of a general Government pardon of 400 other prisoners throughout the country. Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance (MCLA) Dmitry Shashkin briefed the diplomatic corps in a private meeting on April 22. There, he presented a video and an alternative version of the events than the one contained in his factual official statement released to the media. Shashkin said that for approximately 12 hours, he and several opposition MPs, plus Public Defender Sozar Subari tried to negotiate with the prisoners to end the riot. When it was clear the inmates would not end their activities and the situation became increasingly dangerous, Shashkin made the decision for his MCLA riot police to breach the prison wall and end the riot. He said that the 600 inmates quickly surrendered and were transferred to Rustavi Prison Number One. He said no prisoners were injured during the operation. At the end of his briefing, Shashkin told the assembled diplomats that some radical opposition leaders were coordinating and directing the prisoners' activities via cellphone from outside the prison. Shashkin said the GOG has decided not to publicly tie the protests to the political situation for now, saying it "would not be helpful." End summary.

WOMEN PRISONERS RIOT EASTER NIGHT

¶2. (U) Inmates in Tbilisi Women's Prison Number Five (which also houses juveniles), allegedly unhappy not to be among those who President Saakashvili pardoned prior to Orthodox Easter, began rioting in protest on April 18 at around 1600. After 12 hours of rioting, penitentiary officials decided to transfer large numbers of inmates to other prisons to stem the unrest. The women's prison, which houses about 700 inmates, suffered heavy damage during the rioting, including broken windows and furniture. According to Shashkin and the MCLA's official statement (emailed to EUR/CARC and DRL), no one was injured during the riot or during the subsequent transfer.

¶3. (U) The riot started on Saturday afternoon April 18 as prisoners demanded pardons for all inmates. President Saakashvili pardoned 400 inmates throughout the country prior to Easter, but only 23 inmates in the Tbilisi women's prison received pardons or reduced sentences. Minister Shashkin told journalists outside the prison that the inmates' demand to have all 700 inmates pardoned was "unrealistic." Echoing his remarks, Georgian Public Defender Sozar Subari, who was also on the scene monitoring the situation, said the pardoning of all 700 inmates was "unrealistic and impossible to fulfill." Subari added that those convicted of petty crimes or those with questionable verdicts, could be reviewed for pardoning in the future. Representatives from the Public Defender's office did not report any instances of the use of excessive force against inmates during the riot or transfer.

14. (U) In 2008, inmates in this same prison began a hunger strike in protest of what they alleged was Saakashvili's "unfair amnesty/pardoning" practices. An OSCE Human Rights Officer who had access to the prison at the time, portrayed the inmates' hunger strike as haphazard at best. The hunger strike ended after a public call from the Patriarch.

SHASHKIN BELIEVES OPPOSITION PLANNED RIOT

15. (C) In his April 22 briefing for the diplomatic community, Q5. (C) In his April 22 briefing for the diplomatic community, Shashkin claimed the riot was planned and organized by opposition leaders to fall on Easter night. As evidence, Shashkin said he had taken the 23 pardoned inmates to meet with Patriarch Ilia II when he learned of the riot beginning at 16:25. Within five minutes, he arrived at the prison, and said opposition leaders were already on the scene. At that time, the presidential pardons had not yet been publicized, so he believes the inmates had prior orders on when to start rioting. He said that once the inmate leaders (approximately 50-60 women) initiated the riot, they took 16 prison guards' cellphones. Shashkin said police intercepts of the guards' phones revealed the prisoners were talking to several opposition leaders who were standing outside the prison walls, including Salome Zourabichvili and opposition NGO leader Nana Kakabadze. Shashkin said the opposition leaders were encouraging the rioting inmates and directing them to try and engage police and prison guards in a fight, which the opposition would portray as government oppression. Rioting inmates were shouting "Misha Go!" and had demanded a blanket amnesty for all.

TBILISI 00000792 002 OF 002

16. (C) Shashkin noted that Subari and opposition MPs tried throughout the night to negotiate with the rioters and stop the violence. One ambassador questioned whether it was clear that the opposition had planned the riots, or just exploited them. Shashkin believes the former. As further evidence, at 0425 on the morning of April 19, the inmates demanded a meeting with EU Special Representative Peter Semneby, in a written statement with his name and title spelled exactly correct, along with other GOG officials. By this time, Shashkin had already determined the threat to some of the inmates (including those who had children, and those who were sick or pregnant) was too grave and the situation needed to be brought under control. He ordered his 118-man MCLA riot police team to breach a rear wall of the prison, where they would not come in contact with the protesters at the main gate. The 600 inmates quickly surrendered and were transferred without incident to the recently-opened Rustavi Prison Number One. Subari and other officials acknowledged that no inmates were injured during the operation and transfer. Several inmates were threatened by the rioters during the night, and one young child had been dangled from an upper-floor as a threat to the authorities. 50 inmates who have children or were sick, and did not participate in the riots, remain at the prison.

GOVERNMENT KEEPS DOOR OPEN FOR OPPOSITION

16. (C) On the broader theme of how the riot relates to ongoing opposition protests, Shashkin said he does meet with opposition members occasionally. He said some have financial interests, and others continually change their plans. He said that President Saakashvili will not leave, nor will the GOG pay any bribes for opposition members to quit protesting. Shashkin said the only way he sees as a way forward for the country, is to go through this "dead-end process" and then Georgian society must move forward with dialogue and reforms. Shashkin said the GOG has presented a real proposal for a constitutional commission to convene this coming summer, but that without opposition participation, it will not be considered valid. Shashkin said the government "must leave the door open for the opposition" to have a way out.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Shashkin's charge that the opposition exploited the riots appears valid, but we do not have enough information to assess whether the opposition planned the riots or not. However, it is certainly plausible given the timing and rioters' demands. The video and Subari's statements support the sequence of events laid out by Shashkin.
TEFFT